**Structured Small Group Program**

**Grief Journey**

**Goal/ Purpose**

The purpose of this group is to provide a safe and caring place where children grieving a death can come to find support to grow, while grieving and healing. Through peer support and group feedback, they will find healthy ways to express, handle, and better understand the grief they are experiencing.

**Population**

The group will occur in an elementary school setting and will be open to any 4th grader who has recently lost a loved one and who has been recommended to the counselor either by their parent or teacher. The group will serve 7 participants.

**Rationale/Need**

The U.S. Census Bureau states that approximately 1.5 million children are living in a single-family household because of the death of one parent (census.gov, 2012). Although most bereaved children do not show serious emotional or behavioral disturbances, children who lose a loved one are at a greater risk for symptoms of depression, withdrawal, anxiety, conduct problems and lower self-esteem (mourningcloak.org, 2012). Additionally, when it comes to education, the death of a parent can have a negative impact on a child. Children that experience the death of a parent are (mourningcloak.org, 2012):

* 2.5x more likely to fail a grade in school and score lower on standardized achievement tests
* more likely to struggle with communication
* more often suspended & expelled
* more frequently placed in special education

Additionally, a needs assessment will be conducted. A letter will be mailed home to every elementary school 4th grade parent explaining the group and requesting referrals. If a parent decides to have their child participate they will fill out a questionnaire about the child, who he/she lost, how they lost the loved one, how long it has been since the loss, how they are handling it so far, and any other important information the parent wants to share (attached). The needs assessment will better align goals and objectives for the group.

**Theoretical Orientation**

In order to better serve students who have suffered a loss, group therapy based on Carl Rogers’ person-centered theory will be utilized in order to create an environment in which students acknowledge and are comfortable with sharing their feelings in regards to the loss they have experienced. Children need to know that the emotions they are having are normal and should not be bottled up and kept to themselves. This can be achieved simply by the existence of the group. The members will realize that they are not alone, and that some of their very own peers have also gone through similar situations. They also need guidance in learning about the grieving process. To satisfy this need, the group facilitator will utilize Kübler-Ross’ “Five Stages of Grief.” Overall, the group will supply information and direction for a prevalent population that is in desperate need of attention, but can easily be overlooked.

The articles *Coping with Grief* and *Inviting Children to Grieve* were used in creating small group curriculums for school-based grief groups. These articles provide information, resources, and strategies for school-based mental health professionals to help support students who are coping with grief specifically related to death of a loved one. In *Inviting Children to Grieve*, Charkow (1998) argues that children are not exposed to death as part of their daily normal life. Therefore, when tragedies do occur, parents and adults often attempt to shield children from the realities of death, creating confusion and distress in children. Both articles stress the importance of creating an inviting environment in which children can express their feelings, ask questions about their loss, and gain support and comfort. Additionally, both articles suggest that, when questioned, counselors should provide younger students with basic, clear information with age-appropriate terms.

**Ethical and Legal Issues**

When working with young children, group leaders should consider children’s age and maturity when developing group material. Grief group curriculum should be appropriate to each child’s developmental level. In the school setting, the group facilitator should make sure they are adhering to all school rules. For example, in public schools, religion cannot be promoted in the group setting. Additionally, if a parent decides to have their child participate they will be asked to sign a parent consent form (see attached).

Confidentiality should also be taken into consideration when working with school aged children. The group facilitator should remind group members that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed; but that each member should follow established group rules including keeping confidential information within the group. The facilitator should inform group members prior to the beginning of the session that certain personal information can be shared if there is a threat to self or others. It is the facilitator’s ethical responsibility to make sure that each child understands the concept of confidentiality and its limitations.

**Multicultural Issues**

The goal is to be as effective as possible in assisting students in dealing with grief. In order to do so, the group facilitator must be extensively knowledgeable and ready and able to provide the necessary support for every student we encounter. Being aware of the increased amount of diversity among citizens of the United States, it comes as no surprise that our schools are also reflecting these patterns.

To begin, the group facilitator will gather the demographics of the students so that there is knowledge of ethnic groups represented in the group. Also, knowledge of how the students identify themselves will be accomplished through inquiry. The facilitator will be adamant in researching the different cultures and customs of the represented groups in regards to grief. The facilitator will provide information and examples to educate the students about the variety of ways people mourn. By doing so, the group facilitator will be better able to serve the students even though they belong to an assortment of races, ethnicities, and cultures.

**Recruitment and Screening**

The group will occur in an elementary school setting and will be open to any 4th grader who has recently lost a loved one and who has been recommended to the counselor either by their parent or teacher. A letter will be mailed home to every elementary school 4th grade parent explaining the group and requesting referrals.

**Structure**

The group will be a closed group and meet once a week for 6 weeks (6 sessions). The sessions will last 30 minutes each time and will take place during lunch in the counseling suite group room.

**Core ASCA Standard(s)**

* PS:A1.5: Identify and express feelings
* PS:B1.4: Develop effective coping skills for dealing with problems

**Core State Academic Standard(s)**

Reading (Georgia 4th Grade Standards)

* ELA4R1: The student demonstrates comprehension and shows evidence of a warranted and responsible explanation of a variety of literary and informational text.

Listening/Speaking/Viewing (Georgia 4th Grade Standards)

* ELA4LSV1: The student participates in student-to-teacher, student-to-student, and group verbal interactions.
* ELA4LSV2: The student listens to and views various forms of text and media in order to gather and share information, persuades others, and express and understands ideas.

**Objectives**

The main objective of the group is to help students develop skills to appropriately and effectively deal with grief. In obtaining this goal, it will be the facilitator’s responsibility to help the students realize that feeling the emotions is okay and, in fact, it is encouraged. A catharsis of purging emotions can be one of the most beneficial experiences for people who usually store up their hurt, pain, or other feelings. In order to achieve these goals, group members will need to fully invest in the group. They must acknowledge that they are grieving and they need to trust that the group can help them deal with their grief. With almost certainty, some members will resist the process and refuse to talk about their grief with the group. At that point, the facilitator will have to encourage the rest of the group to find out why some people are resisting. Group members will need to rely on each other for strength, encouragement, and support while they each go through the grieving process.

Goal #1 – Educate group members on the grieving process and the different emotions associated when dealing with grief.

Goal #2 – Help group members identify their emotions, and better understand their feelings and behaviors.

Goal #3 – Teach group members healthy coping techniques.

Goal #4 – Help group members say good-bye to each other and to the group experience and taking what they have learned and applying it to life outside of group.

**Program Evaluation**

A pre/post-test will be conducted to evaluate the Grief Journey program. At the beginning and again at the end of the group the children will be asked to fill out a Student Loss Inventory survey (attached) to answer questions about their grief and how they are experiencing it since the group sessions. The data from beginning and end will be used to evaluate the group and its effectiveness.

**Session 1**

**Title:** Telling My Story

**Brief Summary of Session:** This first group lays the foundation for all the following sessions. The primary goal is helping the children feel comfortable with the group, and get to know each other and the facilitator. The group facilitator will talk about confidentially and develop rules for the group, so that each child can feel safe sharing. Each child will be given the opportunity to tell their story to the group.

**Theoretical Orientation:** Person-Centered Approach

**Specific Group Technique:** Active Listening, Paraphrasing, Summarization, Respect

**Duration:** 30 Minutes

**Materials/ Media:** Check-in Sheets (attached), Crayons, Drawing Sheets: “This is what I remember about the Day my Special Person Died” (attached), Folders, Mesh Ball, Name Tags, Note Cards, Pencils, Heart Puzzle Pieces, Story Cards (attached)

**Core ASCA Standard(s):**

* PS:A1.5: Identify and express feelings

**Core State Academic Standard(s):**

Reading

* ELA4R1: The student demonstrates comprehension and shows evidence of a warranted and responsible explanation of a variety of literary and informational text.

Listening/Speaking/Viewing

* ELA4LSV1: The student participates in student-to-teacher, student-to-student, and group verbal interactions.
* ELA4LSV2: The student listens to and views various forms of text and media in order to gather and share information, persuades others, and express and understands ideas.

**Objectives:**

* To introduce group members to each other
* Define group rules and confidentiality and it’s limits
* Group members will share the circumstances of the death with the group

**Assessments**: Observations

**Procedures/ Instructional Strategy:**

Opening Activity:

Name Tags: Name tags will be made with each child’s name and the facilitator will attach the name tag to each child as they arrive to group. The facilitator will also wear a name tag. After a few weeks, these tags will no longer be necessary because of the small size of the group; group members should learn each other’s names quickly. The classroom should have chairs arranged in a circle. As the children arrive they are encouraged to have a seat anywhere in the circle. After everyone has taken a seat, the facilitator will say a few statements and select children to read statements off numbered note cards. The following script will be followed:

Facilitator: We have come together in this circle to become a group

Child #1: To support each other

Child #2: to listen to each other

Child #3: To share with each other

Child #4: To care about each other

Facilitator: We have come together in this circle to become a group

Child #5: Because special people in our lives have died and we need each other

Each week, an additional statement will be added that is specific to the lesson:

Facilitator: Today we will share our stories with each other

Child #6: In order to understand and help each other out

After this opening activity, children will introduce themselves by saying their name, grade, and who died.

Activity 2: Ice Breaker: Getting to Know Each Other/Establishing Rules

The facilitator will say, “Now we will spend some time getting to know each other with these puzzle pieces”. They will then provide each student with pieces of the heart puzzle. Each child will put their name on each one of the pieces. The facilitator will suggest possible things for students to draw on their heart (name/favorite color/favorite activity/favorite sports team...etc). The facilitator should also complete this activity.

When every child is finished the facilitator will ask the students to put their pieces together, the students will then realize the pieces makes a heart. The facilitator will explain and draw parallels between the heart activity and the grief group experience. The facilitator will explain this activity by saying that this grief group is like a puzzle in that in order to put the pieces of our broken hearts back together, we need to help and support each other. The facilitator will remind the group members that they are not alone, and through this process we will help each and support each other. It is important that the facilitator stresses that the group is a safe, supportive environment where students can express their feelings.

After this activity the facilitator will lead a discussion about the group rules. The facilitator will ask for input from group members and steer the discussion by asking specific questions. The facilitator will review the concept of confidentiality with the students stating, “What is said in the group stays in the group”. The limits of confidentiality will be reviewed on an age appropriate level.

Activity 3: Telling Our Stories

The facilitator will explain to the students that they will be using story cards to talk about their stories. The facilitator will toss a mesh ball to one of the students and ask them a specific question from one of the story cards (see attached). After the child has answered the question, they will toss the ball to another child and ask him or her a question from one of the cards, and so on until all the cards have been used and every child has participated. The facilitator will remind students that they can share as much or as little as the want. After each child’s turn, the facilitator will use a check-out to see how the child felt expressing themselves. The facilitator will also use linking to draw parallels between the group member’s experiences.

Activity 4: Journal Writing

The facilitator will say, “Tonight we talked a lot about death and our stories. Each week we are going to add to our journal at the end of group”. The facilitator will provide a drawing sheet entitled “This is what I Remember from the Day the My Special Person Died (see attached). Students are invited pick a comfortable spot in the room, and draw his or her picture. When all group members are finished, students who feel comfortable may share their drawings.

Closing:

Have students return to the original circle around a lit candle with dimmed lights in the classroom. The facilitator will explain, “The flame on the candle reminds us of our special person who died. It also reminds us why we are here in this group”. The facilitator will give the group positive feedback on the work accomplished, reminding them of what they discussed in-group. The facilitator will also remind students to reach out for support if they need it throughout the week.

The facilitator will ask the group for any feedback and then proceed to closing. The following closing script will be used each week:

Facilitator: We came together in this circle in order to become a group

Group: We supported each other. We listened to each other. We shared with each other. We cared about each other

This part of the script is specific to the session:

Facilitator: Next week we will learn about death

Group: In order to understand and help each other out

**Homework/Ownwork**: None.

**Group Stage and Emerging Issues:** Initial(this is the 1st session of 6). Group members may have issues being able to express feelings and emotions and understanding that it is okay to feel the way they are feeling.

*Adapted from: Mourning Child Grief Support Group Curriculum: Middle Childhood Edition, (Lehmann, Jimerson, & Gaasch, 2000)*

**Session 2**

**Title:** Saying Goodbye is Hard to Do

**Duration:** 30 Minutes

**Brief Summary of Session:** This session helps the children say good-bye to each other and to the group experience. Another main goal is to help the children develop their social interest. At the end of the session the children can write a letter to future group members with any advice or encouragement they can offer.

**Theoretical Orientation:** Person-Centered Approach

**Specific Group Technique:** Active Listening, Paraphrasing, Summarization, Respect

**Materials/ Media:** Shoe Boxes, Wrapping Paper, Paint, Markers, Glue, Letter Paper, Pencils

**Core ASCA Standard(s):**

* PS:A1.5: Identify and express feelings
* PS:B1.4: Develop effective coping skills for dealing with problems

**Core State Academic Standard(s):**

* ELA4LSV1: The student participates in student-to-teacher, student-to-student, and group verbal interactions.
* ELA4LSV2: The student listens to and views various forms of text and media in order to gather and share information, persuades others, and express and understands ideas.

**Objectives:**

* To identify the child’s personal gifts and strengths
* To say good-bye to each other
* To celebrate and say goodbye

**Assessments**: Students will complete the Student Loss Inventory post-test survey (attached).

**Procedures/ Instructional Strategy:**

Check-In:

Members are invited to share how they feel about their group experience/the experience coming to an end.

Letter Writing:

The facilitator asks the students to write a letter to other children who will be attending future grief groups. The facilitator prompts them with the following questions: What advice can they give them? What words of encouragement do they have for them as they grieve? What have they learned about grief from this group?

Memory Boxes:

Children are invited to create memory boxes to use as a special place to honor their loved one. Each child is provided with a shoe box and art supplies. Members are invited to use the items they brought and put them in their memory boxes. Some members may wish to display photos, or write special notes. Wrapping paper is provided for children who want to wrap their items before placing them in the memory box. The facilitator will tell the children that even though they are wrapping up there memories today, they can open them again at a later time and add more memories while reflecting on the ones added today.

After all members have completed their boxes, they will share their creation with the group. After all members have shared the facilitator will ask group members to close their eyes and repeat the following sentence, “I will always remember you. Please take care and know you will always be in my memories”.

Closing:

Group members will each go around the circle and state one thing they learned in group that was most powerful. Goodbyes are exchanged

**Homework/Ownwork**: None

**Group Stage and Emerging Issues:** Closing (this is the last group session).Even though group members have been prepared for the end of the group, there still may be some members who have a difficult time with the group ending.

*Adapted from: Mourning Child Grief Support Group Curriculum: Middle Childhood Edition, (Lehmann, Jimerson, & Gaasch, 2000)*

**References**

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